

George Gabert observing 60 years in amateur radio

By JOHN ENIGL
PART I

Two Door county residents are celebrating 60 and 50 years as amateur radio operators this year. They are George Gabert with 60 years in the only hobby licensed by the federal government and 50 year veteran Clayton Cardy. Both have received recognition on the national level for their expertise in the communication art.

Amateur radio is a hobby that is recognized by every nation in the world as having a valuable life saving function. Radio amateurs own two-way communication equipment, often battery operated or supplied with power by portable generators, sometimes located in automobiles or trucks, which on numerous occasions have provided the only communications for disaster stricken areas. In Door county, the Door County Amateur Radio Club, of which both Clayton and George are charter members, works closely with Door County Emergency Government, coordinator by Janet McOlash.

Even communist Russia allows its citizens freedom of the use of amateur radio, realizing the value of a system of communications that can operate in emergency situations.

When George Gabert became interested in amateur radio, in 1923, he was a sophomore at Sturgeon Bay high school. He was intrigued by the infant radio; commercial broadcasting stations were just beginning to appear. KDKA had just begun broadcasting two years before from Pittsburgh, and that was the only station the few that had radio receivers in Door county could receive at first. There was no Federal Communications Commission then; George Gabert's first license was issued by the Department of Commerce. He was assigned the call letters 9JMJ, and he was one of less than 8000 licensed radio amateurs in the country, at the time. A few years later the call was changed to W9JMJ, his present call letters. Today the hobby has about 300,000 participants.

George still has the copy of his first operator's license. There were a few restrictions that would seem unusual today; stations could not be operated between the hours of 7:30 and 10:30 p.m. Those were the hours when the first commercial radio stations had their largest listening audience, and radio amateur equipment was not as free of radio interference as it is today. Also an amateur radio operator could not operate on Sunday mornings when church services were going on.

The amateur (old timers don't like the term "ham," although it means "helping all mankind") was not allowed to broadcast news, lectures, or sermons, music or any other form of entertainment. The rules apply today, the federal government defining the hobby as a two-way art, although some lectures concerning the betterment of the hobby are permitted. The rule is, don't discuss politics or religion, but that's not a government regulation; it's a rule set up by the fraternity of amateur radio.

Sixty years ago when George started out in the field, the federal government allowed radio amateurs to have complete domain of the radio spectrum 200 meters and down (down in frequency, up in wavelength) that is, the part of the radio dial that would fall below 550 kilocycles (now called "kilohertz" in honor of radio experimenter Hertz). That would be below the frequency of WMAM in Marinette, or WYLO in Jackson.

George's first license was issued on May 21, 1923, and he has continuously renewed it since then, although there were four years when he was not permitted to use it, as will be explained later.

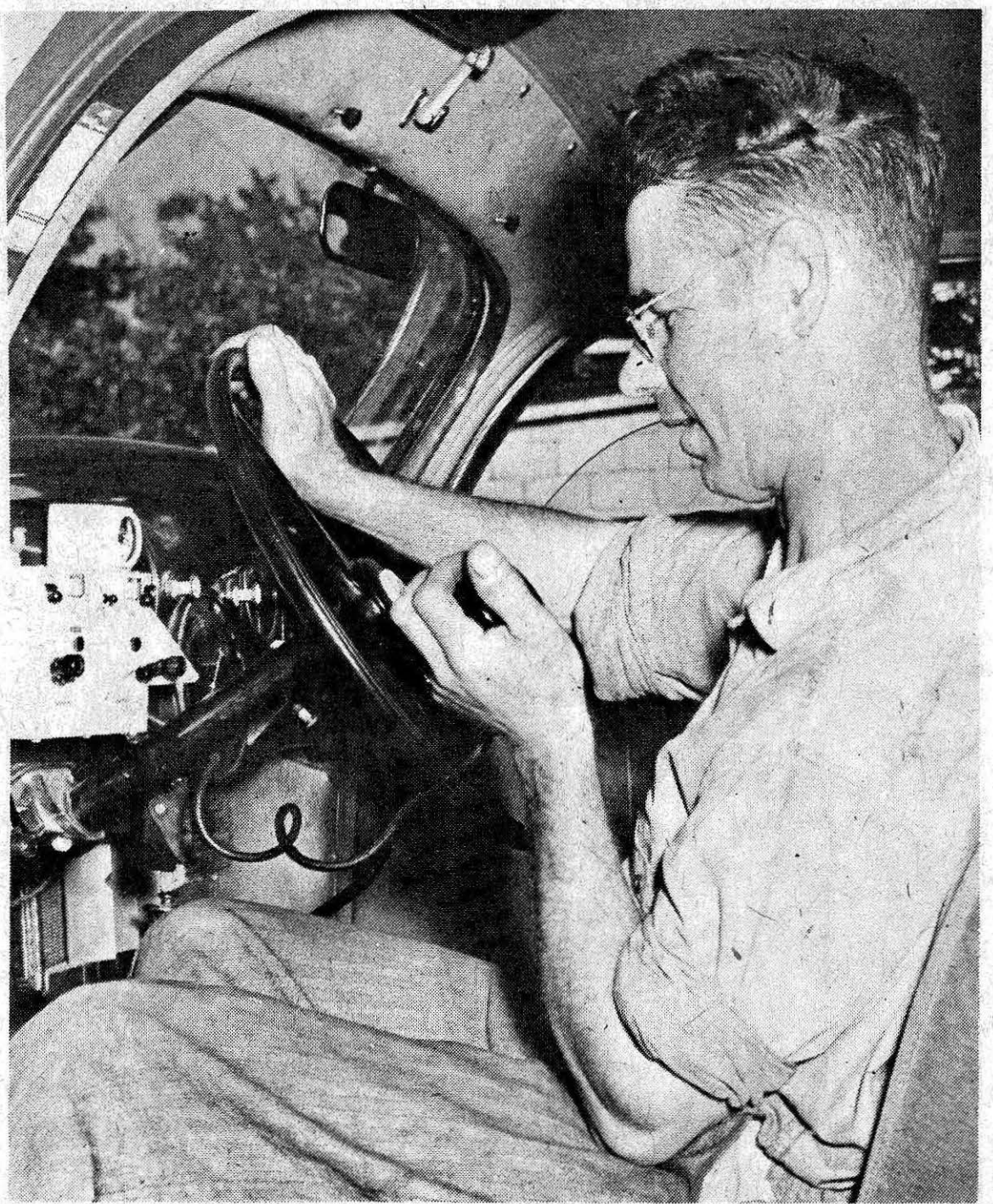
I asked George how he got started in amateur radio.

"Actually, I got the idea because of a book I read that told about two people communicating by radio. Then I tried it out by doing the same thing Barry Goldwater did to get started in the hobby; I built a transmitter out of a Model T Ford spark coil. Of course, it wasn't long and those were outlawed, because they caused too much interference to the commercial broadcast stations.

"I built all of the first equipment I had; there wasn't any boughten radio amateur equipment to be had. There was no frequency control of where you transmitted; crystal control hadn't been invented when I started out. You might be anywhere in (or sometimes out) of the band."

I asked if there were any other radio amateurs in Door county when George got into the hobby in 1923.

"There was Dr. Rod Gordon, a brother of Phil Gordon who built Gordon Lodge. He got a license about the same time I did. We started a radio club in high school and Rod was a member, as well as Otis Kimber, who has also now died. (My family bought its first battery radio from Otis Kimber, a Fada, in 1932. —Enigl) We also had a science teacher who was interested in radio, although he did not become an amateur."



George Gabert with the nation's first W.A.S (Worked All States) mobile amateur radio unit in 1951.

I asked George what kind of equipment he had in 1923.

"We had some radio tubes at the time already, but only a few, like the 01A," George replied. "When I first got started, we used crystal receivers and everything was homemade. Since the band we used was long wave (low frequency) the coils were large, and the equipment was large. The federal restrictions said you could not use a transmitter putting out over 30 watts, and specified the antenna as being an inverted 'L', with four wires that made it look like an old fashioned clothes line. A full wave antenna would have been 200 meters (over 600 feet) long, so we used loading coils to set the frequency."

George has a photograph of that first station from 1923. He tells us it operated on I.C.W. (interrupted continuous wave). A small motor interrupted the current from the transmitter to produce a tone, and the key was used to form the wave into dots and dashes (dits and dahs to the radio amateur) to broadcast with the International code. This method of sending was outlawed about 1927, has had been the "rotary gap" method which required no tubes but caused interference to commercial broadcast stations all over the band.

"I used two 32-volt Willard storage batteries to power this rig," George states. All the radios used for receiving commercial broadcasts were also battery powered back in 1923, with battery eliminators coming about 1925, and all-electric radios arriving about 1927 or 1928 after the development of tubes that could use alternating current for the filaments.

George still talks over the radio to a man in Menominee, Mich., for whom George was the first contact on the air back in 1924. His name is Mark Kronauer, whose call was 9ECK in 1924 when he lived in Marinette. Since he moved across the river and is in a different call area, he is now W8ECK.

One of the highlights in George's amateur radio experience came during the time of a severe storm, when all telephone communications and electric power were cut off in most of Door county. George recalls the year as 1933. His amateur radio station served as the only means of communication between here and the outside world, and he helped to direct repair operations through an amateur station in Green Bay.

"I received a 'thank you' from the power company for keeping up communications with Green Bay from 7:30 in the morning until midnight, but I never received one from the telephone company," George recalls with a chuckle.

But he frequently received note of his amateur radio activities from editor Sumner Harris of the Door County Advocate. He has a photograph of Sumner and Grace Harris intently watching George operate his rig in his house on Third av.

"I'm certain Sumner would have become a radio amateur, had he lived longer. He was fascinated by it. He'd sometimes call me down to the office to talk about radio. He always wanted to be up on the newest things," George states.

Many times, in his thousands of radio contacts in the United States and overseas, George has talked to people who have either been to or heard about Door county. The little peninsula that juts out into Lake Michigan and shows up on any good map of the world is well known.

George "wall papered" his "ham shack" back in the 20's with "Q.S.L." cards — cards sent to him by other radio amateurs confirming the fact that he had contacted them by radio, but he doesn't bother to send out Q.S.L. cards anymore, unless requested. One Q.S.L. card he is very proud of is from March of 1938.

He says, "You can see the card is from Austria; the call letters of the person who sent it to me are OE3AH. You can see his name is Anton Hapsburg, Archduke of Austria. I talked to him by phone (voice transmission) just a few days before Hitler marched in and took over Austria. (The Anschluss, or reunion of Germany with Austria, to which many Austrians, such as the Von Trapps of "The Sound of Music," objected.) He escaped, probably over the mountains to Switzerland as did the Von Trapps, and came to the United States. Over here, he had to make a living by giving lectures."

(The Hapsburgs carried much weight in the rule of Europe in the 1600's and later, intermarrying with other European royal families for political reasons and to avoid genetic inbreeding.)

I asked George what he did for a hobby during World War II, when all radio amateurs were ordered off the air.

He replied, "As you probably know, the amateur radio bands are only permitted to be used when the government does not need them. During wartime, they were used by the military services. The government appealed to radio amateurs to try to get them to sell their equipment to the military services. (Much of the commercial radio amateur transmitters and receivers either were usable by the military services, or were adapted for such use.) They also bought yachts and converted them for pa-

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Gabert

trol duty down here at the shipyards.

"I wasn't on the air the day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and the federal government ordered all amateur radio stations to get off the air for the duration, but I soon heard about the order. Then my hobby became building things with a metal lathe."

George still has a one cylinder engine he built almost completely on that metal lathe. The piston, the cylinder, the piston rings, crankshaft, connecting rods and bearings, flywheel and oil base were all produced by George. He even built a few items most one cylinder engines don't have — an oil pump and fuel pump. About the only parts he didn't build were the ignition points and ignition coil. It runs like a charm, he says.

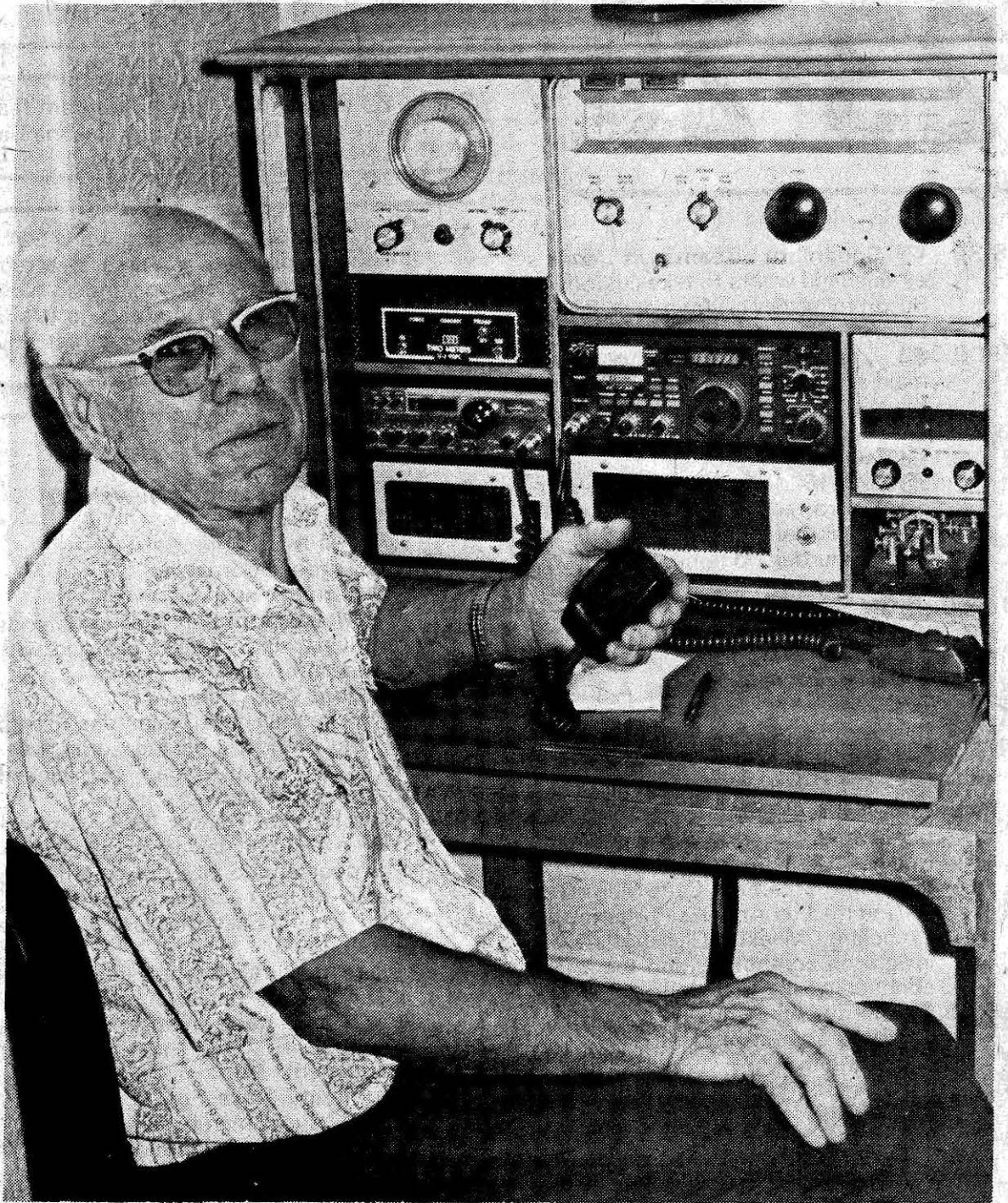
When World War II ended, George went back on the air as soon as the government allowed. By 1951, he had won an award that got him national fame.

The American Radio Relay League (A.R.R.L.) awards a certificate to all amateurs who are able to talk to every state in the Union from within a radius of 25 miles of their home station location. This award is called the "Worked All States" (W.A.S.) award.

By 1949, George had installed a mobile amateur rig in his car. Such units were almost unheard of before World War II, and there were only a few thousand of them in use in 1949. When he received a Q S T.

Some time later, he received a query from the organization, requesting information about the kind of equipment he had used (he had built it himself). He soon received the W.A.S., which included a notation that he was the first person ever to work all states from a mobile amateur station. An article was written up about his rig in the radio amateur news organ QST, and there were features about George's feat in the Advocate and Milwaukee Journal.

George remembers the days in the mid-1950's when some radio amateur began to use the more effective single sideband mode of radio transmission, instead of a.m. (amplitude modulation). On an a.m. receiver, the single sideband (s.s.b.) transmission sounds like "monkey talk" — high or low pitched in voice transmission if not tuned in properly. Amateurs resisted the system as long as possible, despite the advantage it had of allowing more amateurs to occupy one band and its ability to be heard through interference. Then they, including George, adopted an "if you can't beat them, join them," attitude, and obtained s.s.b. equipment, partly because the a.m. equipment couldn't compete for a place on the dial with single sideband.



George Gabert today.

—Enigl

George was also in on the ground floor with frequency modulation (f.m.) transmission. This is the popular method in which it is possible to use a hand-held transceiver (handie-talkie or h.t.) to communicate with any other amateur so equipped within about a 50 mile radius. In Door county, the WDOR antenna tower is used through the courtesy of Door County Broadcasting, Inc., to support a repeater, which receives the signal from the handie talkies and re-broadcasts it at much greater power all over Door county.

George is a charter member of the Door County amateur Radio Club. Along with Clayton Cardy, W9OVO, they have seen the fraternity of amateur radio in Door county grow from a few to more than two dozen, in the club alone. This brings us to the story of the experiences of Clayton Cardy, an amateur for 50 years in Door county.

(To be continued)